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OPINION | Hungary & the U.S.: Will there be a New Direction for American Diplomacy?

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By Imre Bártfai



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American-Hungarian relations have been always complicated, even it soured more in the last seven years since the current right-wing governing party won the elections in 2010. The reason behind is that the governing FIDESZ, Hungary's nationalist party is building an *'illiberal'* state, just as the premier, Orbán Viktor proclaimed in 2014. According to him the power of the Western world is waning, because of liberal democracy, and liberalism in general, which encourages licentiousness, social disorder, and erodes Christian faith. The proposed remedy, the *'illiberal'* state is a concentration of power, greater independence from international institutions, and constant war against liberal civil organizations, a form a *Kulturkampf*. As a result, Hungary moved closer to Russia, which is credited by the critics of the Hungarian government to be the main source of illiberal ideas.

Just recently, a former Hungarian secret serviceman gave an interview in a newspaper in which he described Russian secret service penetration as a first-grade danger in Hungary.[1] Moreover, he claimed that Russian propaganda is being spread in the governing party-controlled media, unlike in Western countries where fake news sources remain the gate through which Kremlin propaganda enters into Europe. Anti-Americanism and more generally, anti-Western sentiments are encouraged by right-wing and extremist political journalist, (such as Zsolt Bayer) in connection to migration crisis, liberalism, 20th-century history and such matters. Hungarians are encouraged to view the EU as the primary source of danger because Angela Merkel and *'Brussels'* are portrayed as weak, corrupt, and foolish *'liberals'* (Liberalism in this context means a smear word only) who merrily allow and encourage Islamic terrorism and uncontrolled migration into Europe. However, since Donald Trump has been elected into office, there was some change in how this propaganda views the United States. Right-wingers view President Trump as a sort of Orbán Viktor, a rebellious, heavy-handed conservative, a nationalist leader who smashes liberal lies and rule. In an interview, Jeffrey D. Gordon, a former Pentagon spokesman, made this comparison.[2] Right after Mr. Trump has been elected members of the FIDESZ governing party and right-wingers celebrated his victory as a "better world order.[3]

It is expected from President Trump to make peace with the Russian government, cease all criticism regarding illiberal practices in Russia and Eastern Europe (especially in Hungary). This is the new American leadership which Hungarian right-wingers, and that part of the populace which they influence, expect.

It is yet hard to assess the effects of anti-Western propaganda on the Hungarian people. Currently, Hungary is a member of

NATO and the European Union, and both the opposition and the old school conservatives can be counted as *Atlantists* (Supporters of NATO).[4] In fact, even with the incumbent government, Hungary is a reliable member of NATO, according to the Secretary-General, who just recently congratulated Hungary for its firm commitment to the alliance.[5]

A new potential conflicting point is the government's recent assault on CEU.[6] (Central European University) CEU is a top rank university, it has been founded by George Soros, and there is alleged investigation being conducted against it for breaking the law. There is a bill in preparation which could essentially close down the university should it fail to comply with the new rules. (For example, the new law would require CEU to open an American campus too because the university is registered as an American institute.) Critics of the government think that this investigation is a part of the anti-civil campaign which the FIDESZ started to pacify hostile political activity in the country by silencing civil organizations which oppose government actions.

While the Trump-cabinet is allegedly not as zealous in spreading civil rights internationally as the former liberal administration, the US embassy already took a stand and criticized the planned legislation.[7] The current charge d'affaires, David Kostelancik was critical toward the Hungarian government before, when he criticized it for its assault on civil organizations.[8]

Even though the previous ambassador was preoccupied with winning the hearts rather than expressing criticism, governing party officials hoped even less pressure from the American side, and a friendly, passive U.S. diplomatic presence in Hungary. So far it seems, their hopes have been in vain, as even the Trump-government will not release certain issues concerning civil organizations and human rights. It is unlikely, that we will see the final outcome of these debates until the new ambassador takes charges of the affairs of American diplomacy in Hungary. Until then it is hard to form a solid opinion on U.S. diplomacy in Hungary. Will the Trump administration strive for mutual consent and good partnership by ignoring the government's anti-civil campaigns and illiberal strategy? Will they make peace with Russia and consequently adopt a pro-Orbán stance in Hungarian politics? Or will they continue the feud with the Kremlin and reject the process of illiberal conquest in Hungary? This would mean the continuation of former U.S. policies regarding civil rights. The American-Hungarian relationship will be –no doubt- influenced by the outcome of the Crimea-crisis or the lack of satisfying outcome of it. (Which is very much a possibility in my opinion.)

Nevertheless, if the Hungarian government wants an amicable relationship with the U.S. they should not press their attack on civil governments further. Whatever stance the American president may take on this, there will be a pressure on him too to provide a continuity in the traditional American commitment to civil rights.

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Endnotes:

[1]. Egy magyar titkosszolgá részletesen felfedi, mennyire súlyos az orosz fenyegetés
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[3]. Beiktatási parti vs. megemlékezés: Budapesten ugyanakkor és ugyanott ünneplik Trumpot és Obamát
<http://hu.budapestbeacon.com/kiemelt-cikkek/beiktatasi-parti-vs-megemlekezes-budapesten-ugyanakkor-es-ugyanott-unneplik-trumpot-es-obamat/>

[4]. Forexample, the former foreign minister GézaJeszenszky. - Jeszenszky Géza az oroszbarátságról: vicc, agymosás, szegénységi bizonyítvány
http://index.hu/belfold/2017/03/14/jeszenszky_szegenysegi_bizonyitvany_hogy_putyin_jobb_lenne_merkeln/

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http://nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_142596.htm?utm_source=linkedin&utm_medium=smc

[6]. University founded by Soros says targeted by new Hungary law

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/university-founded-by-soros-says-targeted-by-new-hungary-law/2017/03/28/1a89f74e-1400-11e7-bb16-269934184168_story.html?utm_term=.345dfc2bcf00

[7]. A budapesti Amerikai Nagykövetség ideiglenes ügyvivője, David Kostelancik az alábbi nyilatkozatot tette közzé |

https://hungarian.hungary.usembassy.gov/dcm_03292017.html

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http://hvg.hu/itthon/20170208_Az_amerikai_ugyvivo_figyelmeztetett_Orban_vallalta_a_civilek_vedelmet

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